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March 16, 1969

THE TOWNES AND THE SALEM WITCHCRAFT DELUSION

(prepared by Joseph L. Wheeler, Benson, Vermont, age 85)

In the data below as to the Towne Genealogy, the whole line from my grandmother Mehitable, daughter of Joseph Towne and Mehitable Cole, who were married at Lisbon, N. H. in 1814, is traced back to William Towne of Salem, who was born in England 1600, married in Yarmouth, in 1620, and came over between 1620 and 1640 "with his wife Joanna Blessing and their [older] five or six children", of eight who are recorded. Edwin Eugene Towne's "The Descendants of William Towne..." a substantial volume published 1901, gives all these and many other details, including details about Yarmouth.

We are descended from Edmund, the second son of William Towne. Edmund was born in England, 1628, see below. Three of Edmund's sisters, Rebecca Towne, wife of Francis Nourse, then spelled Nurse, Mary wife of Isaac Estey, then spelled Eastey, and Sarah whose second husband was Peter Cloyes, or Cloyce, were arrested and tried for witchcraft in the hysteria which swept Salem and several other New England towns in 1692 and 1693. Rebecca Nourse and Mary Estey were two of the twenty respectable persons, hanged on Gallows Hill. Her trial is recounted in Marion L. Starkey's The Devil in Massachusetts. 1949, p. 78-80. Sarah was not convicted. One man, Giles Corey, refused to answer any questions in his trial; he was cruelly pressed to death under planks and stones, in an open field. No Salem "witches" were burned to death.

"Rebecca Nurse was the eldest of three sisters who were still sometimes referred to in the aggregate as the "Towne girls", since their mother, Mary Towne, was still living and at ninety-four something of a landmark in nearby Topsfield. The other two sisters, considerably Rebecca's junior, were both matrons of vigorous character. Mary, wife of Isaac Esty, lived in Topsfield, and Sarah, wife of Peter Cloyce, was a villager and attended the village church.

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"The church had, however, seen little of Sarah or any of Rebecca's other kinsmen since her arrest. The attitude of both Parris and Noyes had alienated the family of the accused. Both pastors had an interest in the case, Noyes because Rebecca and her husband Frances were nominally still members of his congregation, Parris because since Rebecca's removal from Salem Town she had found it more convenient to attend meeting at the village church." (Starkey, p. 77)

Rebecca Nourse, 71, was the matriarch of the highly respected Nourse family and generally described as the highest character of all the victims, though even the Governor's wife was accused. Due to the testimony in her favor, the Governor reprieved her. But the pressure of the psychotic accusers and the deluded crowd was so great that she had to endure a second trial, and her deafness resulted in misunderstanding a question and giving an incriminating answer.

When you visit her substantial house as I did in Oct. 1965, and see the crowds of curiosity seekers, it may come over you as it did me for the first time, that this respected old woman in her seventies, deaf and ill, was dragged from her home to prison in the cold of March 1692 for a crime of which she knew nothing, and would never see her home again, even though she was to be exhonerated, at first, upon the petitions of forty of her neighbors, who all risked reprisals.

Any descendant of the Salem Townes, and there are thousands of them, should read Miss Marion L. Starkey's The Devil in Massachusetts; A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials, 317 p., 1949, Knopf, an accurate, balanced account of the rise and sudden end of this trumped up persecution, based on elaborate study of the court testimony. As Miss Starkey points out, the same motives and prejudices of 1692 still prompt "witch hunts", persecutions, and the killing of thousands of innocent persons. A paper back edition of this was published in 1961 in Doubleday's Dolphin series. $1.75. Incredible as it may seem, thousands of Americans and millions in foreign lands, may be found today who believe there

are real witches and a personal devil running loose.

Another study, more elaborate and somewhat wordy, is Rev. C. W. Upham's Salem Witchcraft 2 vols. 1867, which was reissued in 1959, in which the first volume narrates the real causes of the flare up--partly the political confusion at the time, accompanied by widespread economic stress, uncertainty and envy about property, and the tendency of small minded superstitious people to explain their troubles by supernatural causes. Hell, Satan and eternal damnation were daily in the thoughts of a large part of Christian people in those days. A 750 page book Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds, by Charles Mackay describes similar delusions which have disastrously affected whole nations; a curious volume.

The Salem delusion came to a head through a group of teen age girls who listened to Tituba, an East Indian negress servant in the minister's house, and saw a chance to distinguish themselves by putting on an act, accusing and testifying against more than fifty men, women and even children in Salem and Topsfield. This was fanned into accusations to the Court by the frustrated minister, Rev. Samuel Parris, self important, unprincipled and revengeful. He knew that the entire Towne family had no respect for or confidence in him; he knew that several persons were envious of the Townes, and especially of the Nourses, whose industry and thrift were enabling them to make the payments and on time, since they bought it in 1678, on a valuable farm and house in the outskirts of Salem. In six more years the title would be theirs. We show below a 1966 photo we had taken of this famous house, visited by crowds of tourists. Rev. Upham's book contains a careful map he drew of Salem in 1692, to explain the important part which land disputes played in the case of several of the persons accused of witchcraft. Space forbids copying Chapters 6 and 7 of Miss Starkey's book with its record of unbelievable perjury and credulity in the case of Rebecca. Two paragraphs mean much to any Towne descendant:

"Rebecca was in the eyes of those who knew her well the very essence of what a Puritan mother should be. Deeply pious, she was so steeped in Scripture that the country roughness of her speech -- she had a Chaucerian fondness for triple negatives -- was often shot through with a poetical Scriptural quality. It was not merely a matter of lugging in texts, but a deep, instinctive poetry of feeling that overflowed into her simple, pregnant speech. When Rebecca spoke it was as if one of the grand women of the Old Testament was speaking, Naomi or Ruth amid alien corn (Rebecca herself remembered her birthplace, Yarmouth, England), or the beloved Rachel, or indeed her own namesake.

"In her home life she had resembled the wise woman of Proverbs, and her children she had reared with loving devotion to both their spiritual and temporal welfare. Now in her old age they rose up and called her blessed, not only her four sons and four daughters, but what was perhaps the supremest tribute, her three sons-in-law and four daughters-in-law." (Starkey.p. 66.) But on July 19, 1692, Rebecca was hanged on Gallows Hill, with four other women victims.

"Rebecca Nurse's sister Mary Esty, [fifty eight and youngest of 'the Towne girls'] had been fighting for her life all summer. As early as June, when there was hope of saving Rebecca's life as well, she and her third sister, the door-slamming Sarah Cloyce, had pleaded that fairer conditions prevail at their trials than at their examinations. Since they were allowed no counsel they asked 'that you who are our judges would please to counsel to us, to direct us wherein we may stand in need.' They asked that the testimony of ministers, friends, and their children be admitted, and that the testimony of witches or of 'such as are afflicted as is supposed by witches may not be improved to condemn us without other legal evidence.'

"The petition asked for nothing that the council of ministers had not already recommended, yet it had no effect at all. The judges, determined to get on with their work, could not afford to be guided by such considerations as these

proposed, and which if adopted would have caused the collapse of the whole prosecution. What 'other legal evidence' can you get against a criminal whose malefaction is by definition spectral but the reports of his victims and of criminals who have turned king's evidence?

"After her condemnation Mary Esty made one last appeal, not now for herself, but in behalf of all the others who might come to trial as innocent as she...

"I petition to your Honors, not for my own life, for I know I must die, and my appointed time is set, but . . . that no more Innocent Blood be shed, which undoubtedly cannot be avoided in the way and course you go in. I question not but your Honors do to the utmost of your pains in the discovery and detection of witchcraft and witches, and would not be guilty of Innocent Blood for the world; but by my own Innocency I know you are in the wrong way. . . .

"I would humbly beg of you that your honors would be pleased to examine some of the confessing witches, I being confident there are several of them have belyed themselves and others. . . They say myself and others have made a League with the devil. . . I know and the Lord he knows. . .they belye me, and so I question not but they do others; and the Lord alone who is the Searcher of hearts knows that, as I shall answer to at the Tribunal Seat, I know not the least thing of witchcraft; therefore I cannot, I durst not belye my soul." This petition in full, a statement remarkable in its logic and clarity, appears in Starkey and in several collections of selected documents on U. S. History, including Daniel J. Boorstin's An American Primer.

"Some of these victims, had the judges known it, represented the truest expression of the indomitable Puritan spirit; that spirit which a few decades earlier had refused to bow before a misguided king, now, at the risk of life, would not bow before misguided magistrates. It was wonderful how such men as John Procter and such women as Rebecca Nurse and her sisters managed to keep

unshaken their hold on reality in the face of the impregnable if mad logic of the judges and afflicted girls, and how firm in their knowledge of their innocence, in their faith in God, they would not belie themselves, even though lying was sometimes made so easy that a mere 'Yes', whispered on cue, would be accepted as full and free confession.

"Puritan was ranged against Puritan in these courts. If the judges were Puritan, so were their victims, and though the latter were doomed, the future was theirs. Were the Puritans given to canonizing their saints, such a one as Rebecca Nurse would surely in time have been beatified. Her faith in the Covenant was as deep as Cotton Mather's, deeper indeed in that his was never put to such a test. Thanks to the rooting of that faith, frail as she was, she had faced the dreadful reality unflinching without once taking flight into fantasy. What is more remarkable, her children never urged her to do so. They would move heaven and earth to save their mother, but one thing they would not do, ask her to belie herself." (Starkey. The Devil in Massachusetts. p. 192-193.)

It was five years after the sudden end of the Witchcraft Persecution that the wholesale denial by the accusers, their public prayers for foregiveness, the clearing of names by the Court, and by the Salem church, were going on, and much later, in 1885 and in 1892, the Towne family could put up two memorial stones, one for Rebecca, the other for the numerous citizens who had risked hatred, persecution and perhaps their own death, to testify in her behalf. Many more details are given in volume 2 of Upham, pages 270-296. In 1694 Francis Nurse gave up his homestead to his son Samuel, and divided his remaining property among his four sons and four daughters, reserving only his rights to use things which he would need until his death, Nov. 22, 1695. (Upham v. 2, p. 467.)

The Francis Nourse 1636 house, (Samuel Chamberlain's Ever New England mistakenly says built in 1678) is still standing in Salem; the "Gaol" where she was imprisoned no longer exists, but the house in downtown Salem where preliminary

hearings were held, is a spot for sightseers. The gallows are gone, these many years, and their location on Gallows Hill is now uncertain. The petitions in her behalf and testimony for and against her and her two sisters, are in the Essex County Record books, and what seems a horrible dream from the post is still a reality for 1970 to ponder. The gist of the sad story is powerfully shown in Arthur Miller's well known play and movie "The Crucible", which was occasioned by the spectacular Witchhunt by the infamous Joe McCarthy in the 1950's.

Rebecca's younger brothers, Joseph and Edmund Towne, the latter our forbear, were continually active in her behalf, in bringing retribution on those responsible, including the dismissal and dishonor of Rev. Parris, and the confession of error and repentance by Samuel Sewall the judge, and the jury, in 1697. In 1711 the Massachusetts General Court reversed the "attainders" of all but six. in 1963 Salem was raising funds to erect a monument to the memory of the falsely accused "witches",/ but this has been delayed by doubt, as to the exact location of the gallows, Her monument at Danvers has the inscription: "O Christian martyr, who for truth could die, When all about thee owned the hideous lie. The world,redeemed from superstition's sway, Is breathing freer for thy sake today." (John G. Whittier)

TOWNE LINEAGE FROM WILLIAM TO MEHITABLE

From Edwin Eugene Towne's "Descendants of William Towne..." 1901. This material, with additions, was copied by Harold Leslie Wheeler, back in 1912. The Ancestry of my grandmother Mehitable Towne Wheeler, from p. 104 and other pages.

Mehitable[8], daughter of Joseph[7], Simeon[6], Joseph[5], Nathan[4], Joseph[3], Edmund[2], William[1], the first in this country.

In more detail, the direct line from William to Mehitable is as follows:
1. WILLIAM Towne, b. in England in 1600, and believed to be the son of Richard Towne of Braceby, England. Came from either Yarmouth or Bristol, England,

[Yarmouth most likely] with his wife Joanna (Blessing) Towne and their five or six children. They took up their residence in Salem, Mass. Their children:

i. Rebecca, bapt. February 21, 1621, m. Francis Nurse, or Nourse, of Salem, who d. Nov. 22, 1695; she was hanged July 19, 1692.

ii. John, bapt. February 16, 1623, never married.

iii. Susannah, bapt. Oct. 20, 1625, never married.

iv. EDMUND bapt. June 28, 1628.

v. Jacob, bapt. March 11, 1632, m. Catherine Simmonds.

vi. Mary, bapt. August 24, 1634, m. Isaac Estey. (spelled Eastey at the time. See C. W. Upham's "Salem Witchcraft" 2 v. 1867, v. 2, p. 60, which gives several of these items and says William came from Yarmouth, England) Mary was hanged Sept. 22, 1692.

vii. Sarah, bapt. Sept. 3, 1648, m. first Edmund Bridges, 1660, second, Peter Cloyes. (also spelled Cloyce) Accused of witchcraft but not convicted

viii. Joseph, b. 1639, bapt. Sept. 3, 1648.

Rebecca Nourse and Mary Estey were two of the twenty persons "found guilty" of "witchcraft", and hanged.

2. EDMUND Towne[2], son of William[1], bapt. June 28, 1628, at Yarmouth, England. m. Mary, dau. of Thomas Browning, who was bapt. Jan. 7, 1638. He was one of a committee from the town of Topsfield who in 1675 (during King Philip's war) presented a petition to the General Court for leave to form military companies to protect the people from the Indians while at work. He d. before May 3, 1678. His children:

i. Mary, m. John Pritchard. She died 1717.

ii. Thomas, b. 1655.

iii. Sarah, b. April 26, 1657, m. John Howe.

iv. William, b. March 13, 1659.

v. JOSEPH b. Sept. 2, 1661, at Topsfield; m. Amy, dau. of Robert Smith.

vi. Abigail, b. Aug. 6, 1664; m. first Jacob Peabody 1686, 2d Thos Perley 1696.

vii. Benjamin, b. May 26, 1666.

viii. Rebecca, b. Feb. 2, 1668, m. first Philip Knight, second Nicholas Bailey.

ix. Elizabeth, b. Nov. 2, 1669; m. Thomas Wilkins of Salem. Dec. 19, 1691

x. Samuel, b. Feb. 11, 1673; m. Elizabeth Knight, 4 children.

3. JOSEPH Towne, b. at Topsfield, Mass., Sept. 2, 1661, m. Mar. 13, 1687, Amy, dau. of Robert Smith. He d. in 1717, aged 56. Amy b. Aug. 16, 1668 and d. Feb. 22, 1756, aged 87.

Their children:

i. Joseph, bapt. May 30, 1703.

ii. Benjamin, b. May 10, 1691.

iii. NATHAN, b. 1693.

iv. Daniel, b. Aug. 22, 1695.

v. Jesse, b. Dec. 5, 1697.

vi. Nathaniel, b. June 1, 1700.

vii. Amy, b. Feb. 3, 1704, m. Wm. Hobbs.

viii. Amos, b. July 2, 1709.

(E. E. Towne. p. 27.)

4. NATHAN Towne. b. at Topsfield, 1693, m. Phebe Curtis, & resided in Boxford and then moved to Andover, where his wife died Jan. 5, 1762. He died soon after.

Their children:

i. Phebe, b. July 14, 1714, m. Thomas Farnum.

ii. Catharine, b. July 20, 1716, m. Joseph Curtis.

iii. JOSEPH, b. April 11, 1718.

iv. Nathan, b. April 25, 1720.

v. Solomon, b. May 15, 1722, d. Sept. 1738.

vi. Johathan, b. Oct. 19, 1724.

vii. Anna, b. Mar. 28, 1727.

viii. Asa, b. Aug. 25, 1729.

ix. Aaron, b. July 25, 1734.

(E. E. Towne, p. 27)

5. JOSEPH Towne, b. at Topsfield, Apr. 11, 1718, m. Sarah Kimball, of Andover, Mass., May 14, 1747.

His children:

i. Simeon, b. July 6, 1747, d. Jan. 23, 1749.

ii. Sarah, b. Feb. 20, 1749, m. Ephrain Foster.

iii. SIMEON, b. July 31, 1751, m. Hepzibah Simonds.

iv. Phebe, b. June 3, 1755, m. Nathaniel Abbott.

v. Dorcas, b. Mar. 3, 1758, m. J. Foster 1783.

vi. Esther, b. May 17, 1760, m. Amos Towne, 1784.

vii. Elizabeth, b. May 15, 1763, m. Abner Foster.

viii. Rebecca, b. Mar. 23, 1768, m. Dudley Peabody.

(E. E. Towne, p. 38)

6.SIMEON Towne, b. July 31, 1751, believed at Andover, m. Hepzibah Simonds. They lived at Andover, Mass., and Pittston, Me. and he d. at Bucksport, Me. about 1810.

Children:

i. Ephraim

ii. Anna, m. David Rollins of Pittston, Me. 1803.

iii. JOSEPH, b. at Andover, May 16, 1788.

iv. Phebe, m. Elihu Lord of Pittston, Me.

v. Moody, d. unm.

vi. Hepzibah, m. Trask.

vii. Ruth, b. June 1796, m. Moses Hale of Rindge.

viii. Sarah, b. at Bucksport, Me.

ix. Simeon, b. July 13, 1808 at Bucksport.

x. Charlotte.

(E. E. Towne. p. 60)

(The following data is from Edwin Eugene Towne's "Descendants of William Towne..." p. 104, and from other sources including our Towne family Bible)

7. JOSEPH Towne, b. at Andover, Mass. May 16, 1788, was a farmer, his people lived at Andover, Mass. and in Keene, N. H. At Landaff, N. H., in 1814, he married Mehitable Cole, of Lisbon, N. H., and they moved there about 1820 and lived there till about 1852, or 1854, when they moved to Lake Village, (Lakeport), N. H. where he died about 1855. Mehitable Cole had been born in Chester, N. H. Nov. 30, 1794; she died in Lakeport, April 18, 1878 (says Towne family Bible). Mehitable Cole was one of 11 children of Capt. Isaac Cole, another of whom was Hon. Benjamin Cole of Lakeport, who owned Cole Manufacturing Co., and ran for Governor. Isaac's daughter Octavia Cole married Henry Quimby, later Governor of New Hampshire. Mehitable was sister also of Isaac Cole, later of Clinton, Iowa, and of Mrs. Joseph W. Hill, later of Springfield, N. H. Another son of Capt. Issac Cole was Timothy, a Freewill Baptist minister. A daughter Hannah Cole, married a man named Aldrich (probably John Aldrich of Lakeport, who wrote an illustrated book on the houses of Lakeport, including Aunt Annie's house. I can remember John Aldrich. J. L. W.)

The children of Joseph Towne and Mehitable Cole:

i. Elenor, b. Dec. 20, 1815, m. J. Mitchell Blake 1837; he d. 1878; she d. 1884. 7 children.

ii. Abigail, b. Oct. 20, 1817, m. Jonathan Dow 1841 and lived in Bath, N. H. She d. 1897. 7 children.

iii. MEHITABLE, b. Oct. 21, 1819. m. Ezekiel Hall Wheeler, 1837, and lived in Lakeport, both d. 1897.

iv. Moody, b. May 3, 1821 (Family Bible says Apr. 3) Lived later in Baltimore. had 3 wives; , , Amanda.

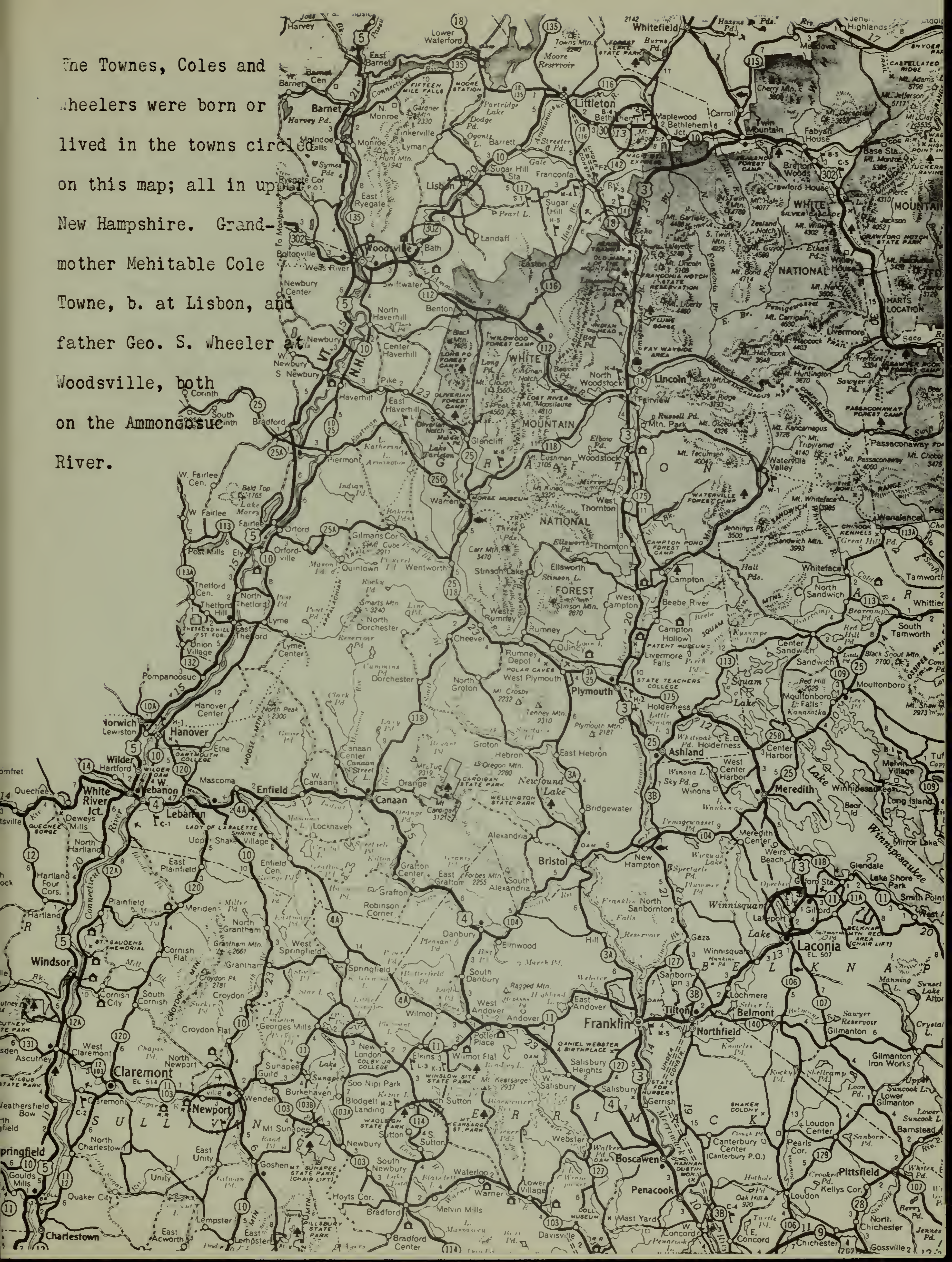
v. Judith, b. Feb. 1823, m. twice, Reuben Smith, 2d Israel Maxfield, both of Lake Village.

vi. Jerusha, b. 1825, m. Alonzo Whitcher. I can remember my great aunts Judith and Jerusha from my visit to Lakeport in 1896, when I was 12. J. L. W.

vii. Joseph, Jr., b. May 22, 1827, lived in Chicago and died there about 1878. Before the great Chicago fire of 1871, he owned a successful dry goods store and later built and operated a hotel in the downtown area, but both were wiped out by the fire and not rebuilt. m. Phoebe Pyle, (she lived only a year or so, died at child birth and their child died), m. 2d Sarah Gilbert of Laconia 1858, who d. 1867; 3d Mattie Harris, 1869. She and he are buried in Lakeport cemetery. [He was greatly respected by my father Rev. Geo S. Wheeler. J.L.W.]

viii. Mary Augusta, b. Aug. 17, 1829, m. Isaac Eastman; her second husband Elder John Knowles, travelling preacher (Adventist). She was also his 2d wife. She married, 3d Levi Allen, another Adventist minister. His daughter Hattie Allen was a close friend of Geo. S. W. and Hannah M. W. until their deaths.

The Townes, Coles and Wheelers were born or lived in the towns circled on this map; all in upper New Hampshire. Grandmother Mehitable Cole Towne, b. at Lisbon, and father Geo. S. Wheeler at Woodsville, both on the Ammonoosuc River.



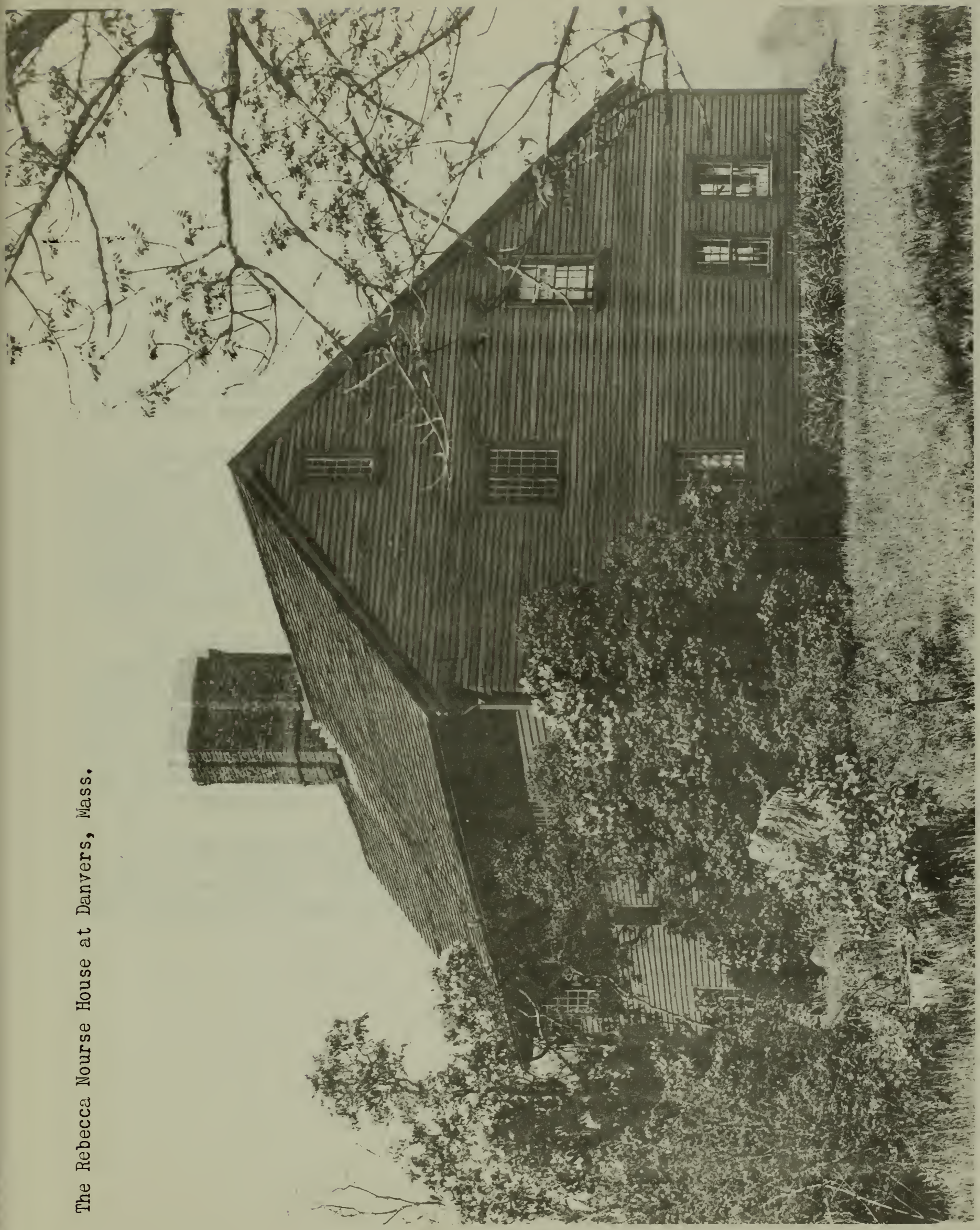
ix. (Benjamin) Kimball, b. May 17, 1832, d. Sept. 9, 1844.

x. John, b. Apr. 28, 1834, d. 1867.

xi. James, b. May 23, 1836, d. at Pike's Peak. (family Bible says Aug. 23.)

8. MEHITABLE Towne married Ezekiel Hall Wheeler.

They were my grandparents. For information about them and six recent generations of Towne-Wheeler descendants see our 1969 Memorandum on "Some of the Descendants of Sergeant Thomas Wheeler."



The Rebecca Nourse House at Danvers, Mass.

THE REBECCA NOURSE HOUSE AT SALEM, MASS., NOW DANVERS (written 3/69)

Built in 1636 by Townsend Bishop. One of the oldest surviving houses in the U. S. Governor John Endicott bought the property in 1648 and his son John lived there, the house being called "the Mansion", and the land was called "The Orchard Farm". John Jr. died Feb. 1668 and his widow married Rev. James Allen, who after her death sold the house and part of the farm to Frances Nourse, April 29, 1678, a respected citizen of Salem, then 58, his wife Rebecca then 57. He assigned parts of his 300 acres to his children who built houses thereon. It was from this house that Rebecca Towne Nourse, (then spelled Nurse) a 71 year old great grandmother, quite ill, was taken to trial in March 1692 as "a witch". Her deafness made her trial more tragic. Two of her sisters were also accused including Sarah Towne Cloyse. Rebecca and Mary Towne Estey (Eastey) were convicted and hung on Gallows Hill as witches, July 19, 1692, despite the pleas and petitions of their neighbors. The remarkable defense statement by Mary Estey appears in volume 1 of Daniel J. Boorstin, ed. An American Primer. 1965, and in the Starkey book.

This house was bought by the Nurse Family Association about 1908, which later gave it with an endowment, to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. It is a tourist spot visited by large crowds. A full account of its early days and its close connection and that of the Nourse and Towne families with the witchcraft trials, is given in vol. 1 of Rev. Charles W. Upham (one time Mayor of Salem) Salem Witchcraft, 1867, reprinted in 1959. There is a briefer account in The Devil in Massachusetts by Marion L. Starkey, 1949, reprinted in paperback, 1961.

Few changes have been made in this house in all its 330 years. Some of its original furnishings stand today on its bare wood floors. There have been several thousand descendants of Rebecca, one of whom Mr. Charles S. Tapley, who lives close by, wrote a brief biography of her in 1930, now out of print. We are descended from Edmund Towne, Rebecca's second brother. Joseph Towne, for whom our son Joseph Towne Wheeler was named, was the fourth and youngest brother and the most active in her defense and later in her exhoneration. Mr. Tapley has a Rebecca chair, also a wooden doll made by Frances Nourse in 1650.

In this photo, taken for J.L.W. in May 1966, by Peter Zaharis, photographer, 46 Summit St., Salem, Mass., the front door next to the near corner, is hidden by the lilac bushes. Tradition says that lilacs grew there in 1692, and have been replanted in recent years.